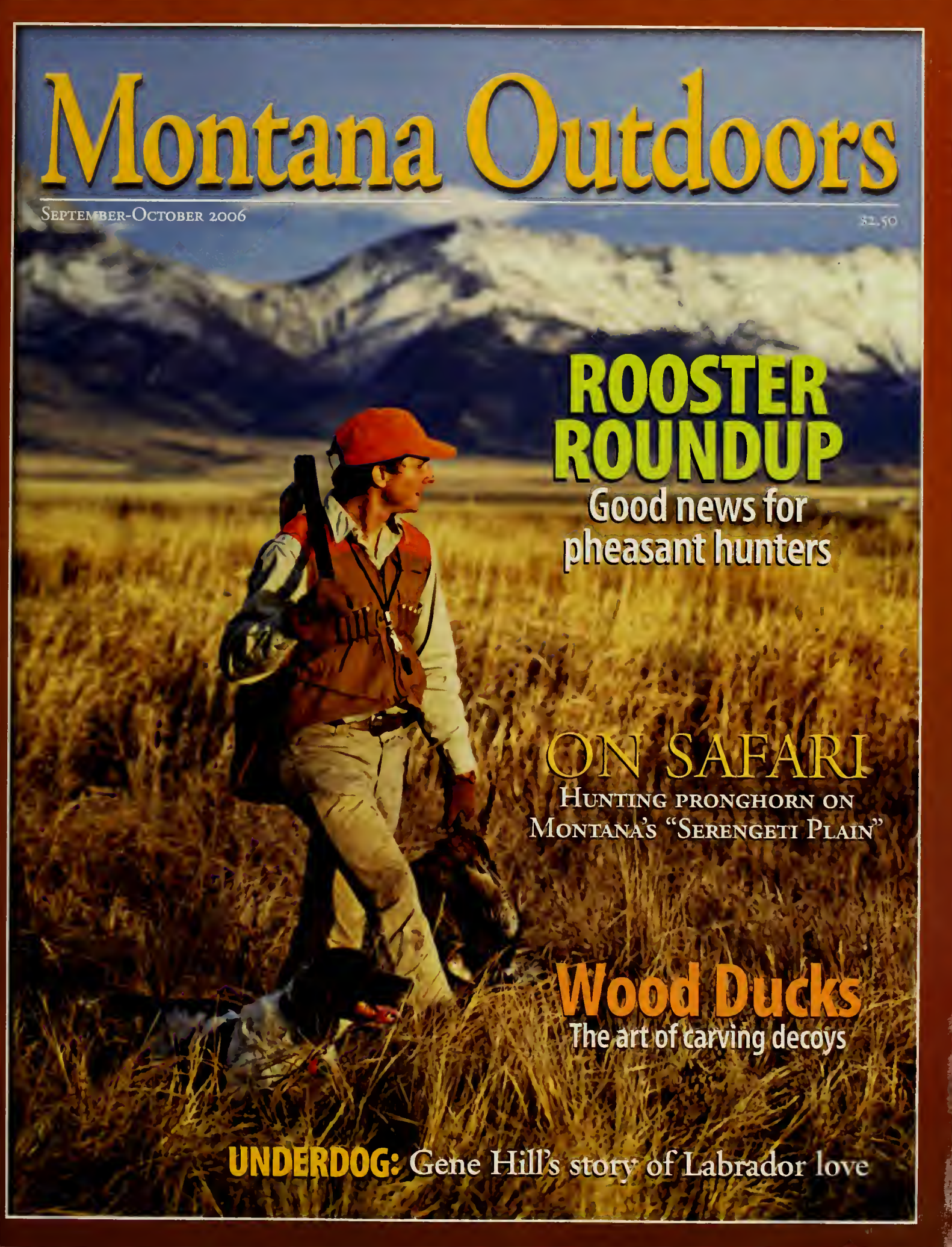


Montana Outdoors

A full-page photograph of a hunter in a red cap and vest walking through a field of tall grass. In the background, there are snow-capped mountains under a blue sky.

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2006

\$2.50

ROOSTER ROUNDUP

Good news for
pheasant hunters

ON SAFARI

HUNTING PRONGHORN ON
MONTANA'S "SERENGETI PLAIN"

Wood Ducks

The art of carving decoys

UNDERDOG: Gene Hill's story of Labrador love



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Montana Outdoors

SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 2006

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Loss of sagebrush has dealt sage grouse a hard blow. Now biologists and ranchers have begun working together to conserve habitat and get the great prairie bird back on its feet. *By Dave Carty*

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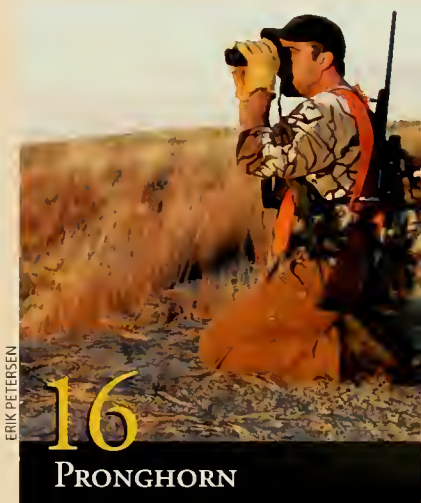
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PRONGHORN

NOWHERE TO HIDE
On the open plains, a pronghorn buck finds a stand of sagebrush to hide from predators. Pursuing the sharp-eyed species is as close as a hunter can get to an African safari without applying for a visa. Learn why on page 16. Photo by Dušan Smetana.

COVER The combination of several mild winters with abundant rains this spring has created habitat conditions that could spell good news for upland hunters this fall. Photo by Denver Bryan.

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Yeah for stationary life forms

I commend you for publishing the excellent article on Lewis and Clark's botanical finds ("The Corps of Botanical Discovery," July–August). Authors Kathy Lloyd and Drake Barton have assembled an article of lasting interest. The story of Lewis and Clark in Montana continues, even though the national hype is winding down. Further, I am delighted to see the plant kingdom sharing space with the more mobile life forms usually portrayed in your pages.

JOHN E. TAYLOR, PH.D.
Professor Emeritus, MSU–Bozeman
Helena

FWP could do more to protect native landscapes

It was refreshing to see an article on Lewis and Clark's native plants in the official magazine of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, the agency charged with preserving our state's native fish and wildlife. It is shocking how the flora of Montana has changed since the Corps of Discovery visited this region. The agency that cares for our state parks needs to protect as much of the native landscape and plants that Lewis and Clark saw on their trip. I hope FWP will adopt a more aggressive policy of caring for and restoring native plants in state parks.

PATRICK PLANTENBERG
Montana Native Plant Society
Townsend

Credit due

In "How Does the Small Mammal Cross the Road?" (July–August), you neglected to credit Mark Traxler, the Department of Transportation (MDT) biologist who worked with Roscoe Steel to design and build the first platform. Traxler had recently attended a workshop in Florida,



where the underground culvert platform idea was presented at one of the sessions. He thought it might work in Montana, and it did. In fact, MDT even named the platform after him, calling it the "TRAXLER."

TIM POWERS
Billings

Author Kerry Foresman did mention Traxler's contribution in his story, but the reference was edited out so the article could fit the allotted space.

Predator control a subsidy

Your recent article "Working It Out with Wolves" (July–August) was very good. Unfortunately, it failed to challenge ranchers' presumed right to a "predator free" environment. Ranchers have successfully externalized a cost of doing business—reducing predator losses by reducing predator opportunity—onto the public by demanding predator control and compensation for losses. The public in effect subsidizes ranchers with payments

for losses or by permitting them or various government agencies to kill the public's wolves because of poor husbandry practices. Ranchers should be required to remove all carcasses promptly, calf or lamb in sheds, pay for shepherds or guard animals, and adopt other husbandry practices shown to greatly reduce losses. Yes, this will increase costs for ranchers—but that is what it really should cost to raise beef or lamb. We no longer allow mining companies to dump toxic wastes into streams with impunity, destroying public values like clean water and fisheries. It costs these companies to mine more cleanly, but the public doesn't compensate mining companies for doing so, because it's considered a cost of doing business, one that mining companies internalize. The same should be true for ranchers. It's time to stop subsidizing the livestock industry by destroying the public's wildlife.

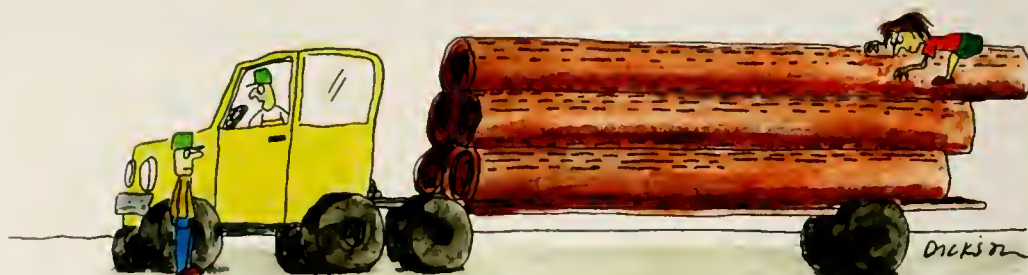
GEORGE WÜERTHNER
Livingston, Montana and Eugene, Oregon

Ecological implications omitted
"Working It Out with Wolves" presented a balanced summary of ongoing efforts to facilitate

cohabitation of humans and wolves in Montana. However, I was disappointed in the sidebar "Wolves and Wild Ungulates." This piece tends to foster the shortsighted and narrow notion that the most important—if not the only—factor in considering the merits of wolf presence is its short-term effects on elk populations levels. Infinitely more important are the broader, longer-term ecological implications of wolf presence. For example, it appears wolves have greatly reduced elk damage to the riparian area of the Lamar River, which is now recovering from decades of overeating by elk. This will likely result in a healthier river ecosystem—including less erosion, cooler water, and larger trout. I have confidence that FWP wildlife experts are considering and looking at the full range of ecological implications of wolf presence in your state. Your article does Montana a disservice to not get people thinking in such terms.

DUANE E. PHINNEY
Hoodsport, Washington

■ We welcome your comments, questions, and letters to the editor. We'll edit letters as needed for accuracy, style, and length. Mail your letter to: *Montana Outdoors*, P.O. Box 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701. Or e-mail us at: tdickson@mt.gov.



"He wouldn't stop hugging and I wouldn't stop cutting, so here we are."

TOM DICKSON

Together, We Can Stop Poachers

Over the years, hunters in Montana have helped FWP restore elk, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, and other game animals. Now they and others interested in conservation can help us protect that wildlife from poachers.

Poaching is a growing problem, one that occurs statewide and year-round. Poachers take some of Montana's biggest and best game specimens, robbing law-abiding citizens of opportunities to see and legally harvest those animals.

Often the culprits make big money from their illegal activities. A record-book deer or elk mount can sell for tens of thousands of dollars. And some wealthy individuals will pay great sums of money to be illegally guided to trophy animals.

FWP game wardens have broken several major poaching rings in recent years. But with just 70 wardens each covering an average of 2,000 square miles (about the size of Delaware), they can't put a major dent in poaching without help.

Fortunately, there's a way for people to assist game wardens. Through the department's TIP-MONT Program, concerned individuals can report anyone they suspect of hunting illegally. Since the program began in 1985, FWP has received thousands of calls, many resulting in wardens catching and judges convicting poachers.

One of the biggest cases in recent years was the result of a TIP-MONT call. A Montana hunter was on a plane flying back to Bozeman when he overheard two men from Tennessee talking about their bull elk hunt in Montana later that week. He knew the elk season was closed. The hunters were also talking about using landowner "ranch tags," which don't exist in this state. The alert Montanan called TIP-MONT the moment he stepped off the plane. Wardens followed up and eventually caught an unlicensed outfitter near

Gardiner, who later pled guilty to two felony violations of the Lacey Act (which makes transporting illegally taken wildlife across state lines a federal crime).

Wardens and federal investigators have so far seized 30 elk heads and racks as part of the investigation. In 2006, a judge sentenced the unlicensed outfitter to a year in federal prison, ordered him to pay \$50,000 in restitution for illegally killed elk and deer, and revoked his hunting privileges for life.

One reason TIP-MONT works so well is that callers may remain anonymous. What's more, if a tip results in a conviction, the caller is eligible for a reward of up to \$1,000. Each year TIP-MONT gives rewards totaling \$15,000 to \$20,000, money that mostly comes from hunting license fees.

A five-member board, whose members are appointed by the FWP director, oversees the workings of TIP-MONT. The program's coordinator and temporary employees hired during the hunting season take the calls. They forward the information to the warden nearest the reported infraction. The Montana Highway Patrol Dispatch Center helps field calls during off-hours.

TIP-MONT receives roughly 1,300 calls each year, but we'd like to see that number increase. To help spread the word about poaching and encourage people to call TIP-MONT, the department is creating posters, TV and radio reports, website information, and an educational trailer that will appear at fairs and other events.

We're making some headway against poaching. But we can do much more if we all work together to fight this problem. If you see or learn about any illegal or suspicious hunting activity, please call 1-800-TIP-MONT.

—M. JEFF HAGENER, *Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*

POACHING
enough is enough
Call: 1-800-TIP-MONT

Q. Which are more common in Montana: mule deer or white-tailed deer? And do they ever interbreed?

A. Mule deer are still more common, though whitetail numbers continue to increase. Montana's estimated mule deer population is roughly 330,000, and the whitetail population is roughly 240,000. The two species occasionally interbreed,

usually a whitetail buck mating with a mule deer doe.



Q. What should I do if my dog gets bit by a rattlesnake? How can I keep my dog away from snakes when we're hunting?

A. The best clue that your dog has been bit is a rapidly swelling face or limb. If you notice that, or you see a rattlesnake bite your dog, drive the animal to a veterinarian immediately. Always carry names and phone numbers of vets in the areas where you are hunting. If you have a cell phone, call en route to alert the vet of the emergency. Each summer, many local hunting dog clubs hold "snake break" clinics, where dogs are trained with a quick but painful electric shock to avoid rattlers. It's not fun to witness, but many hunters believe it's better than losing their dog to snakebite.



Q. Which is larger: the golden eagle or the bald eagle?

A. They are basically the same size: big. According to the National Audubon Society's *Sibley Guide to Birds*, the golden eagle is slightly heavier (10 pounds versus the bald eagle's 9.5 pounds), but the bald eagle has a slightly wider wingspan (80 inches versus the golden's 79 inches). From a distance, the way to tell them apart is to know that the bald eagle soars with wings in a nearly flat plane, while the golden's wings are in a shallow V.

You're reading a winner

For the second year in a row, *Montana Outdoors* has been named the top state conservation magazine in the country by a national organization of conservation communicators.

Montana Outdoors won first place in the magazine category at the 2005 Association for Conservation Information (ACI) awards ceremony held in Orlando, Florida, in July.

Published by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, *Montana Outdoors* also won a third place award in the fisheries article category for "Who Gets the Water?" and third place in the parks article category for "Gushing Over Giant Springs."

Last year *Montana Outdoors* tied for first place in the ACI magazine competition.

Formed in 1938, the ACI is a nonprofit organization of communicators for state, federal, Canadian, and private conservation agencies and organizations.



Should grizzlies be transplanted?

Under a plan recently proposed by Montana FWP, more than a dozen grizzly bears would be transplanted into far northwestern Montana to speed population recovery, while the remaining western grizzly population would not be supplemented.

The draft plan examines grizzly bear populations and potential populations in the Northern Continental Divide, Cabinet-Yaak, and Bitterroot ecosystems and nearby areas. (FWP has already approved a plan for

managing grizzlies in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.)

To develop the proposed plan and accompanying draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), FWP staff analyzed various ways the department could manage grizzlies and listed different management alternatives and the likely consequences of each. Among the main management issues: protecting human safety, reducing livestock loss, and maintaining viable grizzly populations.

Arnie Dood, FWP's Endangered Species Program coordinator, says the plan aims to help the department establish a secure and recovered grizzly bear population in western Montana that maintains biological connections between the Northern Continental Divide and Cabinet-Yaak populations.

"Our goal is to find ways to fit grizzly bears in across a broader landscape as a part of Montana's wildlife heritage," he says. "We also will respond to public concerns over the increasing number and distribution of bears."

The department advocates no new management options for grizzly bears in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, which runs from Canada south to the Blackfoot Valley between the Rocky Mountain Front and the Flathead Valley. "There's already a significant bear population there," Dood says.

In the Cabinet-Yaak, however, grizzly recovery is moving slower than anticipated. "Our preferred management alternative is to place 10 to 15 grizzly bears there over the next few years to speed up the pace of recovery," Dood says. The bears would probably be transplanted from the Glacier National Park area or Canada.

The Bitterroot Ecosystem has

no grizzlies, but eventually bears could move into the area, which contains ample habitat. FWP advocates boosting education efforts there, such as explaining to local residents the need to keep garbage and pet food tightly contained. Such preventive measures would reduce problems when grizzlies begin reinhabiting the region on their own.

The 90-day period for commenting on the draft EIS began



Grizzlies are doing fine around Glacier National Park, but not so well in the far northwest.

July 6 and ends October 3. Citizens can comment by mail, e-mail, and at public meetings held throughout the state in September. For meeting locations and dates, and to view or comment on the draft EIS, visit http://fwp.mt.gov/public/notice/notice_1137.aspx or call the FWP regional office in Bozeman, (406) 994-4042.

The glamour of wildlife research

Contrary to angler suspicions, pelicans and cormorants don't appear to be harming game fish populations on Canyon Ferry Reservoir. An ongoing FWP study that began earlier this summer found that the winged piscivores are

Dig a bit deeper

This fall, Montana resident hunters will see their license fees increase for the first time in 12 years. The 2005 Montana legislature adopted the new resident fees to allow FWP to maintain existing programs, operations, and customer services through 2009. The legislation also created several new discounts for resident youth, disabled, and senior hunters and anglers. Montana's resident hunting license fees, such as \$20 for elk, remain among the least expensive of western states.



Montana Residents

HUNTING LICENSE	2006 PRICE
Conservation	\$8
Elk	\$20
Deer A	\$16
Upland game bird	\$7.50
Bow and arrow	\$10
Waterfowl	\$6.50
Sportsman	\$70

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By carefully studying juvenile pelican vomit, researchers learned that the birds at Canyon Ferry primarily eat carp and crayfish.

mainly eating baitfish.

Cormorant and pelican numbers have increased in recent years due to nationwide reductions in toxic contaminants, particularly DDT. Many anglers suspect the fish-eating birds have begun competing with them for game fish.

To study stomach contents, FWP researchers visited several islands on Canyon Ferry where fledgling pelicans and cormorants were waddling around, unable to escape. The researchers waved sticks over the fledglings' heads, stressing the birds and causing them to regurgitate.

"It wasn't pretty," says Eric Roberts, FWP fisheries biologist.

In the 12 pelican stomach samples, Roberts and his crew found mostly crayfish and carp and few game fish. Of the 52 cormorant stomach samples, they found no walleyes and just a few perch. Though roughly 23 percent of the cormorants had trout in their stomachs—primarily brookies from nearby tributaries—most of the fish were stonecats and longnose dace.

"Pelicans generally feed by herding fish into the shallows and scooping them up in their massive beaks," Roberts says.

"Cormorants dive after fish, and we know they eat trout, but usually it's newly stocked trout. The relatively low percentage of stocked trout in their stomachs makes me think the trout we stocked this past spring have dispersed throughout the lake and are pretty hard for the cormorants to find."

Time to shape up, ethically speaking

The Montana Wildlife Federation (MWF) is asking hunters and anglers to abide by principles promoting safe, legal, and ethical behavior. The organization recently drafted a set of rules promoting responsible actions it believes will help protect Montana's hunting and angling heritage.

"We want hunters and anglers to be more accountable and to understand how their behavior affects how others view hunters

and anglers," says Craig Sharpe, MWF executive director. "If more hunters and anglers abide by this common code, we can improve our relations with landowners, local communities, and governing entities."

For examples of specific behavior promoted by each rule, visit MWF at montanawildlife.com. Wallet-sized cards showing the ten rules are available free by calling the federation at (800) 517-7256 or (406) 458-0227, or e-mailing them at mwf@mtwf.org.

Boy hauls in lunker, Grandpa helps

Nine-year-old Eli Waters was hoping a big walleye might bite his worm as he cast it from the shore of Nelson Reservoir on the last Sunday in May. The Malta youngster and his grandfather, Jim Jones, had already caught a 5-pound channel catfish, an 18-pound carp, and some perch.

The boy's bait hadn't been in the water long before the rod tip started twitching. He set the hook and immediately knew it was no ordinary fish.

"Eli's line started screaming out of his reel," recounts Jones. "He couldn't turn the fish, and he was afraid he was going to lose it. So I tightened down the drag and managed to stop the fish. But it stripped the gears on the reel, and it took almost 20 minutes before we got it close to shore."

The catfish was so large and surly that Jones had difficulty landing it in his small net. The 38.75-inch-long fish weighed 29.71 pounds—2.5 pounds more than the existing record.

Because both anglers had a hand in landing the catfish, Waters and Jones will share the state record, which was officially certified in June.



Eli Waters and grandfather Jim Jones, with their new record catfish. The boy was hoping to catch a walleye but isn't complaining.

Hunting for the rare (?) porcupine

If you've seen a porcupine lately in western Montana, research biologists want to know about it. With funding from FWP, the University of Montana recently began a study to learn if porcupines are on the decline in western Montana. Some state and federal field biologists have been seeing fewer porcupines in recent years, but they can't confirm or explain the apparent population decline. If you see a porcupine, report it to Professor Kerry Foresman, (406) 243-4492, foresman@mso.umt.edu, or Katie Mally, (406) 360-2635, katie.mally@gmail.com. 🦔



Seen one lately?

The Montana Wildlife Federation's CODE OF ETHICS

Adhere to and promote ethical, fair chase hunting and fishing.

Respect fish, wildlife, and natural environments.

Elevate fish, wildlife, and habitat conservation.

Respect private property.

Hunt and fish courteously and safely.

Show consideration for all outdoor users.

Know, uphold, and advance the law.

Be proficient in outdoor, hunting, and fishing skills.

Be knowledgeable about fish and wildlife.

Assist others in becoming ethical hunters and anglers.



SOMETHING TO

Montana's pheasant forecast looks brighter than it's been in years.



LOOKING UP An upland hunter and his Lab ambush a mature rooster in north-central Montana. There and elsewhere in the state, pheasant numbers may be reaching levels not seen for a decade.

Earlier this year, Rick Northrup attended a meeting at a facility along the Rocky Mountain Front not far from Glacier National Park. The rugged, wind-swept mountain foothills are prime habitat for grizzly bears, mule deer, and elk. Oddly enough, the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Upland Game Bird Program coordinator repeatedly heard rooster pheasants crowing.

“When you find pheasants in what’s ordinarily not pheasant habitat,” says Northrup, “that’s a sign things are looking good.”

Northrup explains that when ring-necked pheasant numbers are high—which appears to be the case in much of eastern and central Montana—the birds fill up prime habitat and spill into marginal habitat like that along the Front. Previously a wildlife biologist in Malta, Northrup says the main factors that drive pheasant numbers are the quality and amount of habitat and weather conditions during winter and the spring nesting season.

“If you’ve got good habitat, a mild winter with a good carryover of birds, and the right weather conditions when chicks first hatch, you’ll have lots of pheasants,” he says.

Barring some environmental calamity between now and the October 7 opener, this fall looks to be one of the best pheasant seasons in years.



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CROW ABOUT

BY TOM DICKSON

Scott Thompson, FWP wildlife biologist in Culbertson, reports that spring rooster crowing counts in his district were up nearly 40 percent from last year and 18 percent over the long-term average.



Habitat is abundant and lush in most of Montana's pheasant range. Much of the nearly 3.5 million acres of federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) grasslands in Montana continues to provide excellent ring-neck nesting and hiding cover. Last winter was relatively mild, and abundant rain that soaked much of eastern Montana in May and June created ideal nesting conditions.

"This shows that, given abundant habitat, pheasants do a remarkable job of recovering on their own," Northrup says. "The drought has been hard on pheasants, but if you get a couple of years of good production in good habitat, the populations bounce right back."

Northrup points out that sweeping predictions and generalizations won't hold true everywhere. "The weather and habitat conditions even within a township can vary widely," he notes. "How pheasants are faring

in one area may be completely different just a few miles away." Still, the biologist can draw some general conclusions about the status of pheasants in the state's major rooster regions:

AROUND THE STATE

Northrup says the area around Plentywood continues to be Montana's ringneck Shangri-la. The pheasant-filled farmland attracts Montanans as well as many Minnesotans and Wisconsinites who head west to Sheridan County's seemingly endless tracts of prime pheasant habitat.

"The northeast has a lot of CRP and grain fields mixed together, and has had mild winters over the past few years," Northrup says.

Scott Thompson, FWP wildlife biologist in Culbertson, reports that spring rooster crowing counts in his district were up nearly 40 percent from last year and 18 percent over the long-term average. "Our counts

this year were the highest we've had since 1995," he says. "The hayers I've talked to report seeing quite a few pheasant broods, and I have too."

From Culbertson, pheasant numbers appear to remain strong as a hunter heads south, where the birds thrive in grain and CRP fields from Fairview to Sidney and Glendive. The hunting here can be especially good in river bottoms, which contain dense winter cover and hold moisture that produces insects and lush brood habitat.

Southeastern Montana has a few pheasants here and there, says Northrup, but the rangeland lacks enough crops to support pheasants except in occasional irrigated valleys and nearby wooded draws.

South-central Montana contains pockets of pheasants along the Yellowstone River corridor and tributaries. "The pheasants there are mostly tied to the agricultural areas," says Northrup. Look for places where

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.



One of the best ways to find pheasants is to watch for them at sunup as they head from CRP fields (where they roost overnight) to grain fields (where they feed in the morning). During midday, look for the birds loafing in grassy or weedy cover along fencelines, windbreaks, and creek bottoms. In late afternoon, the birds sneak back to grain fields for supper before finding another sleeping spot in CRP fields.

The best pheasant hunting is usually on opening weekend, when the older roosters haven't yet remembered their tricks from the previous year and the young-of-the-year birds are seeing dogs and hearing shotguns for the first time.

Many of the young birds are soon shot, however, and the remaining pheasants wise up quickly. Though hunters pursue a much warier quarry for the remainder of the season, the good news is they don't face much competition.

"After the first two weeks, most pheasant hunters hang up their shotguns and concentrate more on deer and elk," says Northrup. "But there can be a lot of good pheasant hunting later in the year. The birds flock up more, and when you get some snow it can be a lot easier to key in on areas where they hang out."

If it doesn't snow, however, the going can be tough in November and December. The birds learn to avoid areas that hunters frequent, often moving to places far from the beaten path or off-limits to public hunting.

"But even though the hunting can be difficult if there's no snow, the lack of hunters can make a late-season pheasant hunt real enjoyable," Northrup says. ■

croplands mix with good cover such as river bottoms. A word of warning: Many prime river bottoms have been leased by individuals or hunting groups and are closed to traditional public hunting.

The middle part of the state contains scattered tracts of hardwood draws, CRP fields, creek bottoms, and irrigated fields that can be good bets for roosters. Northrup notes that crowing counts in the Lewistown area this past spring were higher than average.

The Bozeman area and Bitterroot Valley contain some productive pheasant habitat, primarily in lush bottomlands. However, private land access in both areas can be difficult to obtain.

The best place to find ringnecks around Missoula is Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and the surrounding valley. About an hour's drive north of Missoula, the 9,100-acre WMA can provide exceptional pheasant hunting opportunities. Ninepipe was established by FWP to conserve and enhance upland and wetland habitats for a range of game and nongame species. In addition to prime pheasant hunting, the wildlife area has great waterfowling.

Northwestern Montana may have a pheasant or two, especially in the Flathead Valley. But generally you're more likely to spot a

spruce grouse than a ringneck the farther you get west of the Continental Divide.

East of the divide, it's a different story. Much of the triangle formed by Cut Bank, Great Falls, and Havre contains the mix of CRP fields and croplands that grows pheasants. Roosters are even more abundant as you head east toward Chinook, Malta, and Glasgow, especially in areas that have grassy cover and croplands along the Milk River and its tributaries.

HUNTING ACCESS

Hunters have four main access options: Ask and gain permission to hunt private land, hunt private land enrolled in FWP programs, hunt public land, or pay to hunt private land. All have their pros and cons, depending on a hunter's personal values, available time, and financial situation.

Ideally, your favorite cousin owns a big farm along the Milk River so loaded with pheasants the crowing wakes him up each morning. Barring that, you'll often need to do some door knocking if you want to chase ringnecks on private land.

"It can be hard to get permission near towns and cities, where landowners are constantly being asked," says Northrup. "But once you get to the more remote parts of

Montana, many landowners are still real open to allowing people onto their land, provided hunters ask politely and treat their property with respect."

Many hunters pursue roosters on Block Management Areas (BMAs), which offer abundant opportunities to hunt private land, especially in the northeast from Havre to Plentywood. Block Management is an FWP program that pays landowners to allow public hunting access. In parts of eastern Montana, some BMAs contain more pheasant habitat than two hunters and their dogs could cover in a week. BMAs elsewhere in Montana can provide good pheasant hunting, though not like what a hunter will find in Sheridan and Roosevelt counties.

Hunters can also ask permission to hunt on Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program project sites. The program uses hunting license dollars to enhance upland bird habitat and release pheasants on private land. In return, landowners agree to allow some public upland bird hunting. Hunters can receive the updated catalog showing locations of project sites at any FWP office.

Because they usually don't contain grain, most public lands can be spotty for pheasants. The best areas are usually public grasslands next to private irrigated croplands.

FOOTHILL PHEASANTS Across central Montana, even in sight of mountainous elk habitat, hunters can find roosters in creek draws next to irrigated crop fields.



Freezout Lake WMA near Choteau can be good, though it receives heavy early season pressure from Great Falls and Helena hunters. Some federal lands, such as waterfowl production areas and national wildlife refuges, often hold roosters. Others, such as Bureau of Land Management sagebrush-grasslands, rarely contain pheasants. Don't waste your time hunting national forests, with the exception of grassland foothills near irrigated crops.

Under Montana's Stream Access Law, you may legally hunt waterfowl and upland birds (though not big game) along any river or stream as long as you gain legal access (such as with landowner permission, at a fishing access site, or at most bridge crossings). However, hunters who go above the high water mark are trespassing.

Relatively new in Montana, fee hunting continues to grow (though not nearly at the pace seen in the Dakotas). Fees generally range from \$50 to \$150 per hunter per day.

FUTURE PHEASANTS

Northrup says the biggest factor influencing Montana pheasant hunting down the road is CRP acreage. The federal land conservation program was established in 1986 to take highly erodible croplands out of production. This results in cleaner waterways and wildlife habitat in the grasslands that temporarily replace crops. Landowners receive a payment from the U.S. Department of Agriculture by enrolling their land in CRP for up to 15 years.

Nationwide, CRP has been a boon to pheasants and many other grassland wildlife species. Conservation groups have improved the program by pushing Congress to add measures that benefit upland birds, such as requiring landowners to plant forbs (broad-leafed plants) in the mix of grasses on CRP acres.

Montana is among the top three states with acres enrolled in the program. But that could change when CRP is reviewed as part of the 2007 Farm Bill. Dan Hare, Pheasants Forever, Inc., wildlife biologist for Montana and North Dakota, says his group is part of a nationwide effort to retain CRP and the nearly 40 million acres the program is authorized to enroll. But he notes that local hunters and other conserva-



DRINK UP Upland hunters disappointed in pheasant numbers during the past few years may find 2006 the year to quench their thirst for ringnecks.

tionists will need to act now to ensure the amount of CRP acreage in their state does not decline.

"I tell hunters in Miles City, Lewistown, Culbertson, and across Montana that even if CRP is fully reauthorized in 2007, that doesn't mean Montana will retain the acreage it now has," Hare says. "That's why Montana hunters need to call their congressional delegation and tell them that CRP is important to them personally."

Access is the other big issue affecting the future of pheasant hunting in Montana. The increase in leasing private land or closing it to public hunting is a nationwide trend that's bound to continue. As long as ranchers and farmers need to find new income

sources, and growing numbers of hunters are willing to pay, there's no stopping those financial transactions and their ramifications for traditional public access to private land.

Fortunately, some private land enrolled in Block Management helps offset part of that loss. "When the 2005 legislature made the Block Management Program permanent, that was really a huge boost for hunting access in Montana," says Northrup. 🐾

For more information on Montana pheasant hunting, including harvest records by county and region since 1996, go to the bottom of the Interactive Hunt Planner, found on the "Hunting" page of the FWP website: fwp.mt.gov.

On patrol

BY TOM DICKSON

During hunting season, Montana FWP game wardens are on the prowl even more than usual, driving and riding across thousands of miles of Montana back roads. Wardens make sure people are hunting safely and legally and assist hunters and landowners. Recently I had the opportunity to ride along with two wardens whose combined work districts cover 4,000 square miles between Great Falls and the Rocky Mountain Front.

Bryan Golie, an FWP warden for 11 years, grew up near Havre. Now based in Cascade, Golie spends much of his time working with area landowners to open public access to private land. Usually that means trying to find ways to reduce deer and elk depredation with public hunting. Recently, he and the local wildlife biologist enrolled parts of the massive Dearborn Ranch into FWP's Block Management Program.

"If I can show landowners that FWP can protect their property, they seem to be more open to allowing public hunting," he says.

As we drive the back roads this fall morning, the warden stops to chat with ranchers, hunters, and even the postal carrier. "It's important to keep relations open with everyone, so they feel comfortable coming to us with advice or with information on what's going on," Golie says.

He stops at another ranch and talks to the owner about a large elk herd moving on and off the property.

The rancher allows some public hunting but has grown increasingly frustrated with trespassers. Golie tells him he'll keep a close watch on his property over the next few days.

"Many hunters have no idea how much work goes into keeping access open," Golie says as we drive off. We pass a tractor parked across from the ranch, its windows shot out, perhaps by hunters. Golie gives me a look. "Something like that can close down access on a ranch forever," he says.



MONTANA OUTDOORS

"If I can show landowners that FWP can protect their property, they seem more open to allowing public hunting."

—BRYAN GOLIE

"The fewer tickets you're writing each year, the more likely you're solving the problems in the first place."

—TOM FLOWERS



MONTANA OUTDOORS

A few days later I join Tom Flowers, a game warden in Choteau who has worked for FWP since 1989. Before signing on with the department, Flowers worked as a guide for an outfitter, where he learned to pack horses. Today, he's one of the few wardens who still ride into backcountry areas each fall.

Flowers spends much of his time trying to prevent game law infractions before they occur. He talks with hunters to let them know where they can get access to private land—and where they are likely to run into trespass problems. "The fewer tickets you're writing each year, the more likely you're solving the problems in the first place," Flowers says.

As we drive along the Rocky Mountain Front, Flowers talks about how public hunting has been essential in preserving the

Front and other wild areas of Montana.

"Hunters and their monetary contributions are the foundation of North American wildlife conservation," he says.

Flowers tells how he has been frustrated by some new landowners in his work district who buy up ranches once open to public hunting and then lock their gates. "They think they're helping wildlife by not allowing hunting, but then they build fences that block deer or elk migration, or they put in additional buildings and roads," he says. "And too

many new landowners don't understand how hunting is an important part of the Montana culture—and that without public hunting, you won't have the monetary support for conserving wildlife and habitat."

Flowers gets a call on his radio. A grizzly bear has been killed up Green Fork Creek in the nearby Scapegoat Wilderness. This is a serious matter, and it's his job to pack in, bring the bear out, and help investigate the kill. It sounds like a lot of work, but I get the idea Flowers doesn't mind one bit.

"Tomorrow," he says, "it'll be just me and the horses." 🐾

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

Why We Built the Caverns So Far from the Interstate...

*...and other great Montana
state park stories*

Kaneera Red Star Harris, a park interpretive specialist at Chief Plenty Coups State Park, remembers the day when a crowd of visitors and dignitaries gathered around the log home of the great Crow Nation chief to dedicate the site as a national historic landmark.

"A tribal drum group was here to sing Chief Plenty Coups's honor song, his personal song," Red Star Harris says. "When the musicians began to sing, two golden eagles suddenly appeared from nowhere and circled overhead, high in the sky, as though drawn to the song. Everyone was in awe. It was just incredible."

The story is short and unadorned, but it captures the spiritual significance of Plenty Coups's homestead and its sacred spring for members of the Crow Nation. Another intriguing story reveals not only the rich archaeological heritage of the park but also how serendipitously artifacts can appear.

"Because the park is a historic site, every time we do maintenance that requires digging up the earth, state archaeologists must come in first and make sure there are no buried artifacts that might be disturbed or ruined," says Red Star Harris. "One day one of our seasonal employees and I were out walking the grounds. We saw that moles had been digging runnels in the lawn, and one of them had unearthed pieces of an old pipestone pipe. So, we just picked up the pieces and put them in our artifacts collection."

Park manager Susan Stewart laughs at the account. "We can't dig at all around here without doing an environmental assessment beforehand," she says. "And then here's this mole, digging away naturally, and it comes up with an artifact."

Stories can be funny. They can be inspiring. And they can illuminate human behavior. "Every state park has at least one great story that the staff love to tell," says Ken Soderberg, chief of the FWP Parks Division's Visitor Services Bureau. "And usually those stories really do highlight some important aspect of a park." Though space precludes stories from all 50 Montana state parks, here are several that capture the cultural, natural, and even spiritual histories of some state parks—as well as provide insights into park employees and visitors.

You never know

Bannack State Park, also a national historic landmark, has generated many stories that help define the special character of Montana's premier ghost town.

"I've never seen a ghost, but I've lived long enough not to write anything off," says park manager Tom Lowe. "Visitors see ghosts here all the time. They also get what we call ghost photos. They don't see anything unusual when they take the photo, but when they get it developed, sure enough there's an unexplained image in the picture. It's even happened to me. Each fall we put on a show where the cast members dress up in vintage clothing and then apply make-up so they look like they're dead. Twice I've taken cast photos that later turned out to contain ghost images."

Over the years, most of Bannack State Park's ghost stories have featured Dorothy Dunn, a 16-year-old girl who drowned in nearby Grasshopper Creek in 1916. Visitors often mention seeing a ghost, wearing the long blue dress Dorothy was buried in. The apparition moves through the Meade Hotel, one of the town's most popular and elegant buildings.

It gets even spookier. Many visitors have also reported seeing the ghost of a much younger girl.

"That never made any sense," says Lowe.



By Sam Curtis. Illustrations by Peter Grosshauser



"But then last year I was doing research in some old newspapers, and I discovered that another girl, about three years old, also drowned in the creek in 1909. If there really are spirits inhabiting this place, that explains why one is a little girl."

Historic head

There's nothing mysterious about the most popular story told at Travelers' Rest State Park. In fact, it's nationally known. The park holds the only archaeologically confirmed campsite along the entire Lewis and Clark Trail. Darby Bramble, a park interpretive specialist,

Bramble acknowledges the humor of Lewis and Clark's bathroom becoming a destination for history buffs.



says discovery of the expedition's cook fire and latrine in 2002 has drawn history buffs from around the world.

"Visitors are particularly interested in seeing Lewis and Clark's privy," says Bramble.

When archaeologists excavated the now-famous latrine, the presence of mercury in the soil confirmed that Lewis and Clark had camped at the site. The mercury was residue from pills—composed of 60 percent mercury—commonly ingested by members of the Corps of Discovery to cure everything from stomachaches to syphilis. These powerful purgatives, which caused explosive bowel movements, were called "thunderbolts" by the men.

Bramble acknowledges the humor of Lewis and Clark's bathroom becoming a destination for history buffs. "It's fun for visitors to stand on the very footings that the expedition members stood on," she says, "even if that means they're hanging out at a 200-year-old latrine."

Bramble emphasizes the educational value of learning a part of American history not usually related in school classrooms. "I've found that telling the complete story of what happened here makes Lewis, Clark, and the other members of the expedition more human, more engaging for visitors," she says.

Not Walt's cave

Visitors, of course, are what Montana state parks are all about. And

Writer Sam Curtis, Bozeman, is a frequent contributor to Montana Outdoors. Illustrator Peter Grosshauser lives in Flagstaff, Arizona.

visitors are as diverse and surprising as the parks themselves, as Rhea Armstrong, assistant manager of Lewis and Clark Caverns State Park, can testify. After 19 summers of guiding people through the caverns, Armstrong has learned that visitors from areas more urban than Montana sometimes have difficulty understanding the natural world.

"I guided a boy who came from California, where he'd spent some time at Disneyland, and he was truly amazed at the inside of the cavern. 'It looks just like Walt Disney made it,' he told me. 'Yes, but this is real,' I said. 'Well, it looks just like we're inside a mountain.' 'We are inside a mountain,' I replied. Then he burst into tears, suddenly frightened that nature in the raw is not nature as Disney made it."

Other visitors show their loose grasp of the natural world by the questions they ask. One of Armstrong's favorites: "Why did you build this cave so far from the interstate?"

Of course, no cave would be complete without stories about bats and claustrophobia.

Armstrong says one day a park guide was reassuring a skeptical group of visitors that the bats hanging from the ceiling of the cave were harmless. She spoke of the role bats play in controlling flying insects. And she told them not to worry that a bat might bite them or get tangled in their hair.

Those are old wives' tales, she said. Just then, a big bat fluttered from the ceiling and flew down onto her jacket, where it clung for all to see, up-close and personal. The collective sucking of breath and ripple of nervous laughter emanating from the gathered visitors suggested that the guide's reassurances had fallen on deaf ears that day.

Caves can cause claustrophobia. Most visitors know before they descend too far into the cavern whether they will be affected by that oppressive, hard-to-breathe feeling. "But one guy didn't admit his claustrophobia until we were halfway through the tour," Armstrong says. "He then revealed his fear but said he'd be okay as long as I kept talking. But, he added, if I went silent for even a moment, he'd have a panic attack."

So Armstrong started talking, and she proceeded to filibuster her





way through the rest of the tour, babbling non-stop for the next hour with every fact, story, and trivial tidbit she could recall about Lewis and Clark Caverns. The visitor made it to the exit without panicking, but Armstrong says she nearly panicked herself a few times thinking she'd run out of things to talk about.

An international affair

Some state parks sit in such remote parts of Montana you'd think nothing noteworthy could happen there. That's what Ryan Sokoloski thought in 2004 when he took his first park manager job at Hell Creek State Park, on the south shore of Fort Peck Lake. At the time, he figured he'd spend most of his time talking to visitors about local wildlife and walleye fishing, and checking to make sure they were having a good time at the out-of-the-way park.

"The job was supposed to be low-key, and I was really looking forward to that," Sokoloski recalls. "I figured the biggest problem I'd have would be someone forgetting to pay a camping fee."

One Saturday, after managing the park for only two weeks, Sokoloski called a staff meeting to go over work assignments. "We're gathered there in the office when suddenly federal law officers, in vehicles with lights flashing, race right up to where the camp hosts' motor home is parked. Clouds of dust are swirling in the air and agents are jumping out, surrounding the motor home and shouting, 'Come out of there, now!' I mean, it's like a scene from a TV show.

"We have no idea why the federal agents are escorting these retired campground hosts in their 70s from their motor home. I'm thinking, Holy cow, what's happening here? And I'm panicked. It's Saturday. My supervisor is at home in Miles City, hours

away. There's nobody to call, and I honestly don't know what to do.

But I'm the park manager, right? I need to assume responsibility, to find out what's going on. So I sort of meander over there and say, 'Um, I'm the park manager. These are my campground hosts. Do I need to be aware of something?'

"Well, they're still talking to these folks and hauling bags of stuff—evidence I assume—out of the motor home. One of the agents takes me aside and explains that the campground hosts are under investigation for stealing cultural artifacts from federal lands. They've been under surveillance for several years. And because the hosts are Canadian citizens, this is not only a federal case, but it's also an international affair!

"You gotta be kidding, I say to myself. I'm supposed to be in this remote park, 25 miles north of Jordan, the most geographically isolated town in the lower 48 states, and I'm part of an international investigation!"

Sokoloski, now park manager at Makoshika State Park, ran back to his office and called his supervisor's office to leave an urgent message. "I said, 'You've got to call me right away. You won't believe what's just happened. I need to be your number-one priority.' Then I added, 'You sure don't waste time breaking in a new manager.'"

The incident became grist for a good, long story (the criminal case is still pending). But often the stories that come out of Montana's state parks are simply little vignettes about what park personnel do best: assist visitors and offer them insights into this place we call Montana.

Chris Dantic, an interpretive specialist at Giant Springs State Park near Great Falls, remembers helping an out-of-town visitor hire a cab to drive her from the park to other famous sites in the city.

"She was a gracious lady in her early 70s," Dantic says. "When the cab arrived, she walked up, looked directly into the cab driver's eyes, and said, 'Please take me to the Charlie Manson Manor.' I looked at the driver, and we both grinned. 'That might be a bit scary, ma'am,' I said. 'You may want to try the Charlie Russell Manor.'" 🐾

"I figured the biggest problem I'd have would be someone forgetting to pay a camping fee."





JULY WARTULOK

ON MONTANA SAFARI

PURSuing PRONGHORN IS AS CLOSE AS YOU CAN GET TO AN AFRICAN BIG-GAME HUNT WITHOUT FLYING HALFWAY AROUND THE GLOBE.

BY HENRY GOULD

The Great Plains region, which includes much of eastern Montana, has been called “America’s Serengeti,” a reference to Tanzania’s vast grasslands and their abundant and diverse wildlife, including wildebeest, giraffes, and lions. Montana’s expansive plains boast their own rich and varied species, such as mule deer, sage grouse, golden eagles, coyotes, and North America’s answer to the African gazelle: the pronghorn.

Though commonly called antelope, the pronghorn is a unique species not related to gazelles or any other antelope. In fact, it’s not really related to anything. “The pronghorned antelope is found only in North America, and it possesses so many anatomical peculiarities, found in no other animal, that zoologists have created for it a separate Family (*Antilocapra americana*), which it occupies in solitary state,” wrote William Temple Hornaday, director of the New York Zoological Society, in 1904. “It is like an island in a vast sea, unrelated . . . an animal more wonderful than the rarest orchid that ever bloomed.”

In Montana, we not only have the great opportunity to see this remarkable creature, but we also can hunt it in a manner that closely resembles an African safari.

AN EXPERT’S PERSPECTIVE

One of the greatest admirers and advocates of pronghorn was Bart O’Gara. For years head of the Montana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit at the University of Montana, O’Gara also co-authored two pronghorn books unparalleled in their scope and depth: *Prairie Ghost: Pronghorn and Human Inter-*



TIM CHRISTIE

AMERICA’S SERENGETI The vast grasslands, abundant hoofed wildlife, and crawl-on-your-belly stalks make Montana antelope hunting akin to pursuing gazelle in Tanzania.

action in Early America and Pronghorn Ecology and Management.

O’Gara, who died in 2003, recognized the unique qualities of pronghorn and pronghorn hunting. “Now that free-ranging bison and elk have been nearly eliminated from their pristine habitats on the prairies, the pronghorn is the only big-game species truly at home on the wide plains and provides the only chance most North Americans have for a big game hunt on the prairie,” he wrote. “Crawling over a landscape covered with cacti, sagebrush, sharp rocks, and an occasional rattlesnake to get close enough for a shot can be exciting.”

Clearly, O’Gara felt the essence of antelope hunting was in the vastness of the plains, the calculated and painstaking stalk on foot (not to mention hands and knees), and the carefully placed, well-earned shot. He deplored the blast-away mentality of those he called “despoilers,” who chase pronghorn with vehi-

cles, “flock shoot,” and fire at running animals.

“The sort of person who indulges in such pursuit, besides being a poor sport, lends needless credibility to the propaganda of individuals and groups that are inclined to label all hunting as unfair and inhumane,” he wrote.

Though he shot his share of large pronghorn bucks, O’Gara believed that “any mature buck, fairly stalked and humanely killed, is a grand trophy.”

In the hunting chapter of *Pronghorn Ecology and Management*, O’Gara notes that many new antelope hunters are surprised the animals are so unlike deer: “When seeking their first

pronghorn, deer hunters soon discover a different kind of hunting. Deer are neutrally colored, blending into their habitat; pronghorn, with their contrasting color, are sharply visible. Although mule deer share parts of the pronghorn range, they usually shun the open terrain where pronghorn thrive. To detect danger, deer rely primarily on hearing and a keen sense of smell; pronghorn rely on their extraordinary sight. Deer use cover and stealth to escape peril; pronghorn avoid cover and depend on speed.”

Within O’Gara’s description of the differences between deer and pronghorn lie the basics of successful pronghorn hunting.

WHY VISIBLE DOESN’T NECESSARILY MEAN HUNTABLE

On the wide-open plains, it’s easy for a hunter to see the leggy profiles of a distant pronghorn herd. The animals’ distinct reddish tan backs and legs are highlighted by their stark

BUILT TO BOOK Pronghorn are the Formula One cars of Montana. Because the antelope are perfectly designed for life on the move, they can run at speeds of 35 mph, three times even the fastest predator in the area.



NEAL & MUMFORD

white rumps, bellies, neck bands, and cheek patches. Locating pronghorn is not a problem; the problem is how far away they are.

A pronghorn's primary means of protection is the ease with which it can see predators at a great distance. While you are checking out a herd of antelope with your 8x binoculars, they are probably checking you out with their 8x eyesight. What's more, the pronghorn's

eyes, bulging from sockets that protrude from the skull, take in about 300 degrees of their surroundings. With a slight movement of its head, a pronghorn can see the entire landscape—with you in it. Hiding from that sweeping, exacting eyesight is a hunter's main job when pursuing pronghorn.

When stalking, stay low; don't skyline yourself atop hills or ridges. Most important, move slowly. Antelope eyes are especially attuned to the movement of predators. By standing as still as a sagebrush, you may be

able to elude detection from a distance, even when you're in full view of these animals.

"As a general rule, whenever a person can see a buck's [white] cheek patch, that pronghorn is capable of detecting the human's movements," wrote O'Gara. Once it detects you, a pronghorn doesn't seek cover as deer do but rather takes off running, often for several miles before stopping.

Pronghorn are built to flee. Long, slender legs and massive lung capacity allow them to cover great distances quickly, just like African

Henry Gould is a freelance writer in Bozeman.



antelope. Pronghorn can reach a top speed of 45 to 50 miles per hour and can stay at 30 to 40 miles per hour for several miles. If they sense you are stalking them, the prairie racers can be in the next county before you have time to curse your bad luck or ineptitude.

"Pronghorn often race alongside and cross in front of vehicles, as if to prove they can," wrote O'Gara. "Such behavior is characteristic of open-country bovids of Africa." (It's also yet another reason hunting pronghorn from vehicles can hardly be considered sporting.)

HOW TO HUNT PRONGHORN

Though antelope hunting often requires covering a lot of ground, the hunt usually begins from a stationary position as the hunter scans the surrounding prairie from a high vantage point. Use binoculars or a spotting scope to glass the country and locate a pronghorn you're interested in stalking. Though most active around sunrise and sunset, the animals are selective eaters that often keep moving throughout the day, drifting across the plains in search of preferred foods such as wild blue

flax and penstemon. The longer you scan the landscape, the more stalking possibilities you're likely to have.

It's not uncommon for other hunters in the area to spook the pronghorn you're watching. If that happens, watch where the animals go and remember which hills they skirt, what draws they follow, and where they end up. These will be places to hunt on other days.

Once you see a pronghorn you want to stalk, take a moment to make a plan. Be patient. Take time to survey the topography of

the surrounding plains and devise an approach route that will keep you out of the animal's sight while you move in close enough for a clean shot. Make mental notes of landmarks near your quarry so you can relocate the animal each time you peek over a rise.

The stalk is rarely a straight line between you and the pronghorn. You often must detour away from your quarry before circling in, a process that can take an hour or more. As you slowly move around the pronghorn, periodically check on its position, slowly easing

your eyebrows up over a hill or ridge to peek through the vegetation, making sure the animal is still around. It's not uncommon for a hunter to make a long stalk, belly to the ground, only to find on rising that the pronghorn has wandered far away.

You'll often discover other antelope in this process of moving closer. Be ready to change your game plan as the hunt evolves, perhaps even to pursue one of the newly spotted animals. And check your back-trail frequently. While you are moving, antelope

in the vicinity are also moving, and they may come in behind you. If you're not careful, you may scare these newcomers into flight, and they may spook the pronghorn you're after.

How close you need to get depends on your stalking ability, rifle, and marksmanship. Many skilled pronghorn hunters crave the challenge and excitement of creeping to within 100 yards of their target. The challenge here is seeing how close you can stalk, not how far you can shoot.



LOW, SLOW, AND CLOSE The trick to hunting pronghorn is to move below the horizon so the eagle-eyed grazers don't make you out and dash to the next county. Unfortunately, a successful stalk often requires crawling across inhospitable terrain. Some hunters take long shots, but many try to creep to within 100 to 150 yards. Bipods or shooting sticks are great tools to help you make a single, accurate shot.



THE WELL-PLACED SHOT

While some hunters shoot at pronghorn 300 yards away or farther, most are uncomfortable trusting their marksmanship at that distance, and for good reason. "Range is deceptive on prairies and deserts, especially for hunters not accustomed to the country or game," wrote O'Gara. "A crawling hunter with eyes near the ground is at a disadvantage in estimating distances. Bright sunshine, clear air, and gleaming white hair often combine to make pronghorn appear closer than they are. Conversely, at dawn or dusk or on a stormy day, the animals seem to shrink and fade, appearing farther away than they actually are."

When you finally sneak to within range, take your shot from a prone, sitting, or kneeling position, not standing. And consider using a monopod or bipod to steady your rifle, which should be zeroed-in before the

hunt. "For pronghorn hunting," O'Gara advised, "the best range to zero-in a rifle and load is 200 to 250 yards. With most pronghorn loads, a shot taken at half that distance will not be more than 2.5 inches high."

That well-placed shot ends your hunt, of course. Ideally, it will be the climax of a great adventure on the prairie. Maybe you glassed the crests and troughs of the rolling plains for hours; walked, ran, and crawled for miles, circling around knobs, ducking down draws, easing over rises with the smell of sage in your nostrils and the prairie wind cuffing your ears. Perhaps you watched hundreds of pronghorn, saw them group and scatter, drift and race across the grasslands like herds of Thomson's gazelle on the African veldt, giving you a sense

of eastern Montana's immense distance and open space—and an appreciation of these extraordinary animals that make shortgrass prairies their home.

Every hunter wants to make a clean shot, and many hope for a trophy buck. But if

"Across the board, we don't have a single weak area in our antelope population."

O'Gara were still around, he'd probably tell you that pronghorn hunting is not so much about the kill or the horns but about understanding our sense of place within the vast prairie landscape that defines so much of Montana. 🐾

MONTANA'S PRONGHORN NUMBERS ON THE REBOUND

They almost went the way of the bison. As many as 30 to 40 million pronghorn may have once roamed the North American plains. But during the late 19th century, homesteading on the prairies, fencing, livestock grazing, and market hunting reduced their numbers. By 1915, just 13,000 remained.

A 1924 survey put Montana's population at only 3,000. By the early 1980s, due largely to modern wildlife management that regulated hunting and restored habitat, pronghorn numbers in the state had climbed to around 160,000. Although the next decade of harsh winters, dry summers, poor forage, and heavy predation by coyotes cut the population in half, recent weather conditions have been more favorable for pronghorn, and numbers have begun to climb again.

"For the last two or three years we haven't really had any winter out here," says John Ensign, FWP regional wildlife manager in Miles City. "Over-winter antelope mortality has been fairly low. Also, we had excellent moisture this spring, so there's lots of forage. Antelope in southeastern Montana are doing really well."

In 2005, pronghorn numbers in Ensign's region—Montana's prime pronghorn area—were 48 percent above the ten-year average. "I suspect we're probably at those numbers or even a little higher this year," he says.

Graham Taylor, regional wildlife manager in Great Falls, sees a similar picture in his region. "It appears that in places we'll be at or approaching record all-time high numbers," he says. "Across the board, we don't have a single weak area in our antelope population."

GOOD NEWS ON THE HORIZON The near future looks favorable for Montana's pronghorn population, thanks mainly to recent mild winters.

The population also looks strong in the northeast, though it's still recovering from the harsh winter of 2003-04. "Numbers are not as high as they could be, but they're good—and better than last year," says Harold Wentland, regional wildlife manager in Glasgow.

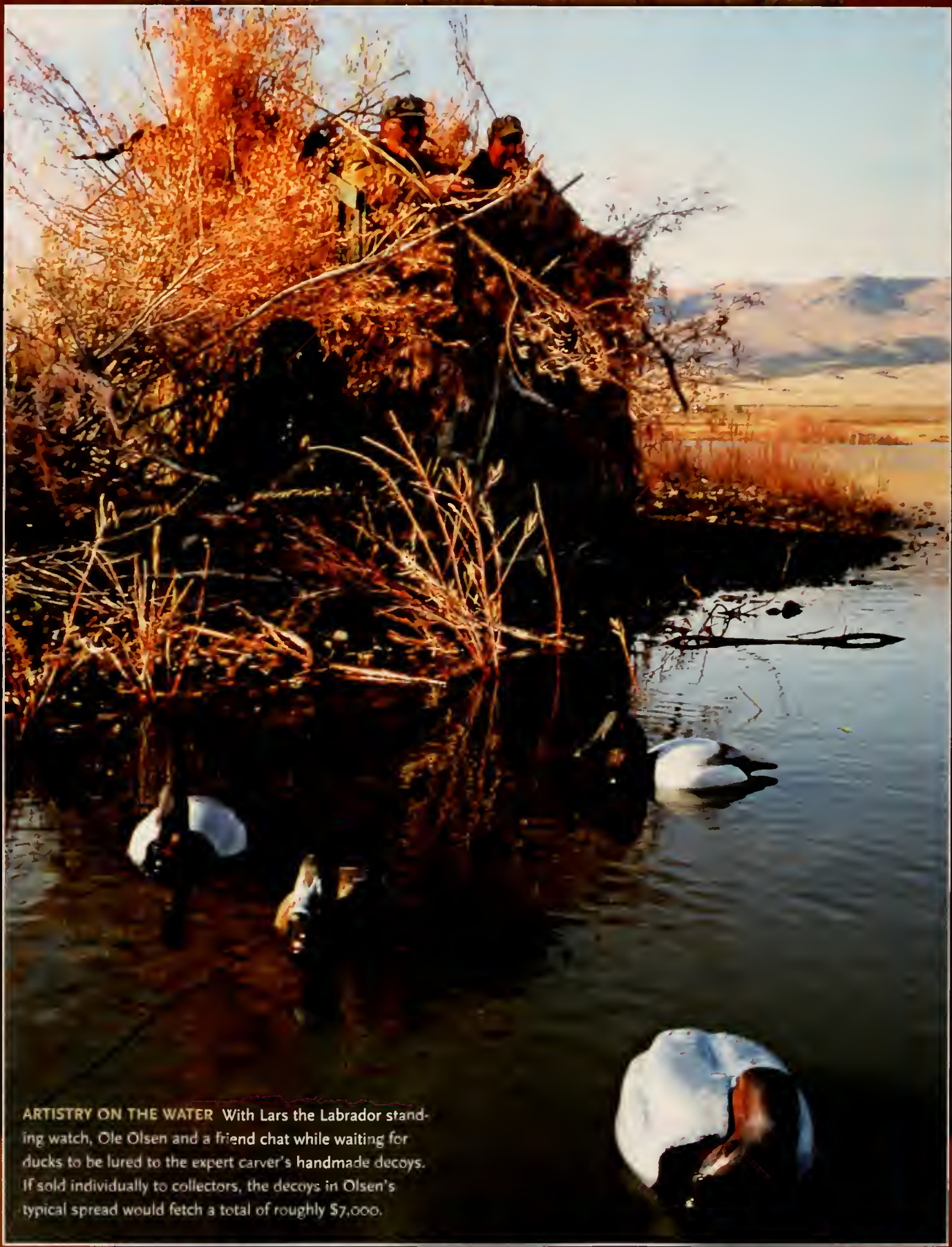
Because much of the best pronghorn hunting opportunities are on private land, wildlife managers urge hunters to plan ahead. "Line up places to hunt before venturing out here," Ensign says. "We've been putting a lot of effort into securing nice antelope places in our Block Management Program. That's something hunters should explore."

For a quality hunt, Ensign suggests avoiding the opening week of the season. "Probably half our harvest occurs in that first week, and the bulk of that comes on the first weekend. If a person can go a little bit after the opener, their odds of getting on private ground improve."

And if you wait until after the deer and elk seasons open, when most big game hunters head for the mountains, coulees, and river bottoms, you can often have the open plains and their pronghorn pretty much all to yourself. ■



ERIK PETERSON



ARTISTRY ON THE WATER With Lars the Labrador standing watch, Ole Olsen and a friend chat while waiting for ducks to be lured to the expert carver's handmade decoys. If sold individually to collectors, the decoys in Olsen's typical spread would fetch a total of roughly \$7,000.

to CARVE a DUCK

IN TOWNSEND, "OLE" OLSEN TURNS TREES
INTO ARTISTIC WATERFOWL ATTRACTANTS



Wilford "Ole" Olsen of Townsend gets his ducks the hard way. He drives 1,000 miles to buy pieces of wood, which he cuts, carves, sands, and paints to resemble live ducks. Then he sets several dozen of these hand-made decoys in the water and waits for them to draw real birds into firing range.

Olsen, 76, has been hand-carving decoys for more than 60 years. As a young hobby carver growing up during the Depression in upstate New York, he made his initial decoys with a hatchet. The creations were so crude, he says, "my mother often tossed them into the stove to warm the kitchen." No one is doing that these days. Today his decoys, which sell for roughly \$150 each, are sought by collectors throughout the country. "The ducks are the harshest critics," says Olsen.

Olsen moved to Montana in 1975. Tens years later, he retired from the U.S. Forest Service, where he'd been a logging engineer. But he never really retired. Olsen carves about 180 decoys each year. About half he sells to individual duck hunters and decoy collectors. The rest go to Ducks Unlimited auctions (and half of those he donates). The continent-wide conservation group has recognized his generosity with its National Distinguished Service Award.

Two years ago I went hunting with Olsen and his massive black Labrador retriever, Lars, on Canyon Ferry Reservoir.

"Are you going to be useful as well as ornamental?" Olsen asked me as we headed out. I assured him I'd do whatever he needed. The main job that morning was to help set out the four dozen "blocks" (decoys) in his spread. Watching the canvasback and redhead decoys ride the water took me to a time I'd only

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
DAVE SHARPE

read about, before the invention of plastic and battery-powered duck imitations, when all decoys were carved of wood by hand.

The ring-necked ducks flying past our blind thought the wooden decoys looked pretty good, too. Several landed in the spread, even as Olsen was setting out the last few.

One reason the decoys appear so realistic is that Olsen knows his wood. Each year he tows a trailer from Montana to a small mill in northern Minnesota to buy basswood and northern white cedar—the two prime woods for carving.

The decoys are highly coveted. Ducks Unlimited has presented his decoys to many of its top officials in the United States, Mexico, and Canada. For hunters and collectors, Olsen is back-ordered a year or more. His most popular decoy is the hen mallard, due to the unique scratched-paint, fan-brushed feathering technique he uses. Of the two dozen species he carves, Olsen favors the cinnamon teal.



SITTING DUCK Olsen's decoys ride in the water just like real ducks.

"They have a unique bill that's longer, wider, and shaped differently from most puddle ducks," he says.

Though there are far fewer decoy carvers today than in years past, the tradition lives on in books and websites devoted to the craft.

"Study what a real duck looks like," is Olsen's advice to new carvers. "Look at the feather groups, the patterns, and how real ducks ride the water."

Olsen carves decoys in the Great Lakes style, which imparts more detail and a flatter bottom than decoys traditionally carved in the Chesapeake Bay region, home to many of this country's premier decoy carvers over the past century.

In the hand, his decoys are works of art. Seen bobbing in the waves, they look remarkably lifelike. Olsen says he once watched a hen canvasback land in his set and swim around looking for companionship. She swam up to one of the drake sleeper decoys, attempting to flirt with him. She bumped her breast against his side, but no response. She swam around and bumped against his other side. Still no response. Ignored, she swam over to another drake, but he too remained woodenly aloof. She returned to the sleeper, tucked her own head back, and stayed beside him for an hour. When Olsen started picking up his spread, the hen continued to stay by her sleeping beau, only an oar's length from the boat. Finally, Olsen had to scoop him up. With a nasty look at the intruder, she reluctantly left her silent companion and flew off. 🦆

Dave Sharpe is a freelance photographer and professor emeritus at Montana State University.



THE DUKE OF DECOYS Olsen, of Townsend, says it takes roughly one day to make a finished decoy. First he ages and dries northern white cedar planks before gluing them together and cutting the body outline with a band saw. Next he carves the body with a razor-sharp draw knife. Then he shapes the decoy body with a rasp. The head, which he carves earlier, is made of basswood, a tightly grained wood. (Continued) >>>







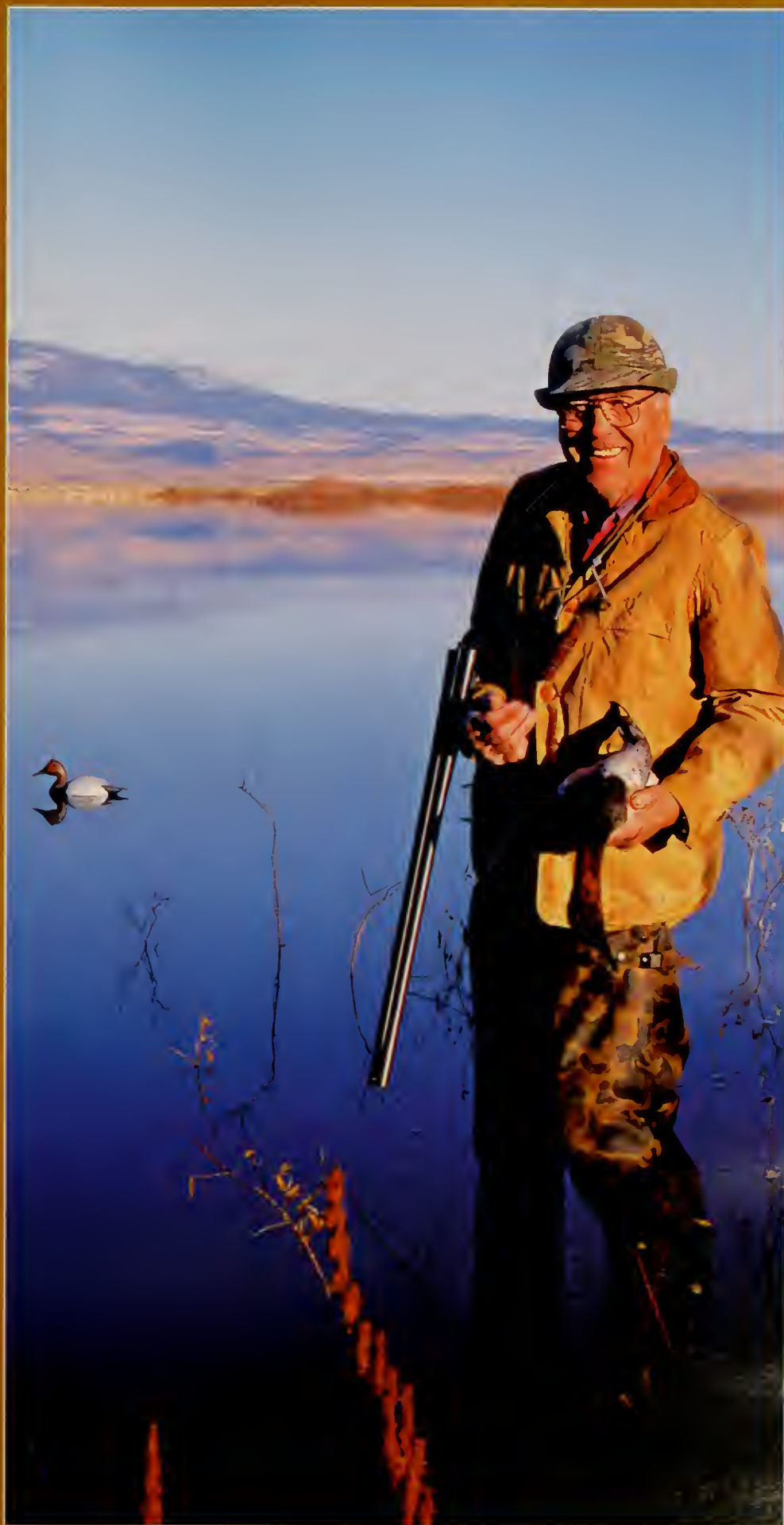
>>> FINISHING TOUCHES

After fitting the head with glass eyes, Olsen begins the meticulous task of painting the decoy. He also uses a wood-burning tool and scribe to create the realistic feather patterns that collectors rave over. Each finished decoy is stamped with a number and signed by the artist. Olsen's decoys fetch hundreds of dollars at auctions, and have been presented to Ducks Unlimited officials throughout North America.





MADE TO BE USED "They look good on the shelf, but they look better on the water, doing what they're supposed to do," Olsen says of his decoys, which he hauls to nearby Canyon Ferry Reservoir each fall during the waterfowl season. The 76-year-old hunter has been setting his spreads on the Missouri River impoundment for more than 30 years. Right: Olsen holds a drake canvasback duped into shotgun range by pieces of wood, masterfully transformed.



DOWN BUT NOT OUT

LOSS OF SAGEBRUSH HAS DEALT SAGE GROUSE A HARD BLOW. NOW BIOLOGISTS AND RANCHERS HAVE BEGUN WORKING TOGETHER TO CONSERVE HABITAT AND GET THIS GREAT PRAIRIE BIRD BACK ON ITS FEET. BY DAVE CARTY

Craig Fager, a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologist, frowns as he watches a pickup creep along a ridge several hundred yards in the distance. They're birders watching sage grouse display on an open expanse of Bureau of Land Management sagebrush-grasslands. Below their truck in a grassy meadow, sage grouse strut on leks—open areas in the sage where the birds conduct their mating ritual. The sounds of *poik, poik*—made by the males rapidly deflating large yellow air sacs on their breast—float up like the soft pop of distant balloons. Some birds are just a few feet from the truck's open window, the driver a black shadow in the gray morning light.

"Those guys are way too close," Fager says. "We'd prefer if people would watch sage grouse from a distance using binoculars or spotting scopes. In some cases, people are actually loving these birds to death."

The biologist lets his binoculars dangle from his neck and watches the truck for a few more minutes, then turns and strides back to his





DRIVE-BY SHOOTING As more people learn about the spectacular mating display of sage grouse, the number who visit leks to observe and take photos has increased. Unfortunately, too much human disturbance can scare the birds off, thus reducing reproductive success.

pickup. The ground here is littered with whitened grouse droppings, and Fager stops to point out caecum, an oily, tarlike deposit that roosting sage grouse occasionally pass to rid their digestive systems of sagebrush residue and other by-products.

A sea of sagebrush stretches for miles in every direction from nearby Dillon, where Fager is based. This arid region contains some of the best sage grouse habitat in

planned for the rest of the day.

Back in his truck, Fager hunches over the wheel, sipping coffee through a few day's growth of sandy beard. Stacks of notes, empty cups, scattered clothing, and notebooks litter the seats. He aims the pickup down a dirt road, then turns in to a ranch. Thick clusters of blue bunch, Indian rice grass, and needle-and-thread grass grow between clumps of blue-gray sagebrush. Fager says private land

"Without all this," Fager says, indicating the ranchland around us, "sage grouse could be in real trouble in this part of the state."

NEARLY LISTED

Such a decline would mirror a trend across the bird's range elsewhere in the western United States. From 1965 to 1985, sage grouse numbers plummeted by more than 50 percent, due mostly to the loss of half of the species' historic sagebrush habitat, which has been degraded or converted to other uses. In 2003, nearly two dozen environmental and conservation groups, including the American Land Alliance and the Institute for Wildlife Protection, petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to list the sage grouse as a threatened or endangered species.

During the next year, under Endangered Species Act (ESA) requirements for petitioned species, the USFWS assessed risks to sage grouse based on factors such as habitat loss and predation. In late 2004, the agency concluded that the species "does not currently warrant federal protection."

"Even though there's been a decline in the species' range, the decrease wasn't enough to merit our definition of endangered under the Endangered Species Act," says Pat Diebert, a USFWS biologist in Cheyenne,

“ Despite falling sage grouse populations in some states, large enough tracts of good habitat exist in Montana and elsewhere to preclude listing. ”

Montana. Yet today Fager has counted only about half the number of grouse he saw on this site earlier this year. He suspects the difference is due to the offending truck. The wildlife biologist considers giving the occupants a talking to, then reconsiders. He has several other leks to visit and a full schedule

like this is essential to the future of sage grouse—a bird that recently was almost listed as a federally protected species.

"You hear a lot about the need to protect sagebrush on public land, but just as crucial are ranches like this adjacent to the public land," he explains. "Sage grouse mate and nest on the sagebrush flats, but then they raise their broods in riparian bottoms and irrigated alfalfa where the chicks find insects and succulent forbs [broad-leafed plants].

Freelance writer Dave Carty, Bozeman, is an avid upland bird hunter and a frequent contributor to Montana Outdoors.



GOODBYE SAGEBRUSH, HELLO CROPS Though important to farm economies, converting sagebrush-grasslands to fields of wheat and other grains steadily eats away sage grouse habitat. Poorly managed grazing can also damage areas essential to the birds' survival.



Wyoming, who was part of the agency team that advised against listing the grouse. "Despite falling sage grouse populations in some states, large enough tracts of good habitat exist in Montana and elsewhere to preclude listing. The birds are still well distributed in their historic range, and some of those numbers are actually increasing."

PROBLEMS LOOM

Though Montana dodged the ESA bullet, that doesn't mean sage grouse are thriving here. "We've lost birds in peripheral areas where, slowly but surely, sagebrush is being converted to crops," says Rick Northrup, FWP Upland Game Bird Program coordinator.

Other threats include some types of energy development, such as coal-bed natural gas (methane). Energy development increases the number of roads that chop up sagebrush habitat and adds power lines, which provide convenient roosts for raptors. Invasive plants add to the problem. Cheatgrass, for example, is an annual that dies off early in the season, increasing the frequency of fires that destroy sagebrush.

Glenn Hockett has seen firsthand how habitat loss has reduced sage grouse numbers. "I remember seeing sage grouse north of Malta, north of Loring, and around Three

Forks, Manhattan, Helena, and the Tobacco Roots," he says. "They're virtually gone from those areas because their habitat is gone."

Hockett is president of the Gallatin Wildlife Association, a hunting and conservation organization in Bozeman that joined the coalition of groups petitioning to list the

resources coordinator for the Montana Stockgrowers Association, Bodner believes that habitat loss has been overblown. He says other causes, such as increased predation by raptors, may be greater factors contributing to sage grouse population declines. Bodner is especially concerned that federal listing would harm

“ If livestock growers have to start selling out because of overregulation and then their land gets developed... that doesn't help sage grouse one bit. ”

sage grouse. Protecting the birds under the ESA, says Hockett, is the best way to protect both sage grouse and Montana's tradition of sage grouse hunting. He points out that in some years during the 1960s, hunters harvested nearly 100,000 sage grouse. But as sage grouse numbers dropped, Montana's upland bird hunters turned their attention to pheasants and sharp-tailed grouse. In recent years, Montana's annual sage grouse harvest has averaged only 7,000 birds.

Jay Bodner disagrees that listing sage grouse would be in the bird's best interest. Natural

livestock operations. And that, he adds, could threaten sage grouse conservation.

"Listing would mean an increase in regulations on BLM [Bureau of Land Management] land, where a lot of grazing takes place," Bodner says. "If BLM grazing allotments are cut back, that could affect the entire operation of a livestock producer. When you look at the big picture, if livestock growers have to start selling out because of overregulation, and then their land gets developed and chopped up with new housing, that doesn't help sage grouse one bit."

“ Our new approach will be to inventory leks over the entire range of sage grouse in Montana. We’re hoping all the sage grouse states will use the same methodology, so that in 10 to 15 years comparable data over the bird’s entire range will be available. ”

STEMMING POPULATION LOSS

FWP officials say they want to see sage grouse habitat conserved, the bird’s populations increase, and Montana’s sage grouse hunting tradition continue. But they maintain that the state’s sage grouse population is largely intact and supported the USFWS decision to not list the species.

“There are definitely some problems with the loss of sage grouse habitat in Montana,” says Northrup. “But compared to Washington and California, or even parts of Colorado, we have some really large and sustainable sage grouse numbers.”

To ensure those numbers stay strong, FWP developed a management plan that describes the current status of Montana’s sage grouse population and sagebrush habitat and identifies major threats.

As part of the plan, FWP has begun improving how it monitors populations. Wildlife biologists and volunteers keep tabs on sage grouse numbers from year to year by counting the birds on leks each spring. “We have some great data from areas of the state where we’ve gone back every year to monitor leks,” says Northrup.

But the overall information has been inadequate. Northrup says some past counts were haphazard—“convenience counting,” he calls it. Also, Montana has used monitoring protocols that differed from those used by other states. The lack of consistent, thorough data makes it difficult for Montana and other states to understand—much less explain to federal officials—how well their sage grouse populations are faring.

“Our new approach will be to inventory leks over the entire range of sage grouse in Montana,” Northrup says. “We’re hoping all the sage grouse states will use the same methodology, so that in 10 or 15 years comparable data over the bird’s entire range will be available.”

With better population information, biologists will be able to more accurately track sage grouse population range and densities.

FWP’s management plan also calls for conserving more sagebrush habitat. Recently, the department began purchasing 30-year lease agreements from private landowners whose property harbors key sage grouse habitat. Through the Montana Sagebrush Ini-



JEFFREY H. PHOTO.COM

tative, landowners agree to not spray, plow, or burn sagebrush-grasslands habitat in return for a one-time payment of \$12 per acre. So far, FWP has leased roughly 140,000 acres and aims to enroll another 40,000 acres by the end of 2006. The initiative is funded by FWP, using upland bird hunting license revenue, and the USFWS.

Montana is also conserving sagebrush through Habitat Montana. Made permanent by the 2005 legislature, the program uses hunting license dollars to purchase permanent conservation easements on private land containing prime wildlife habitat, including sagebrush-grasslands.

CONSERVATION IN PERPETUITY

Ranchers often are criticized for damaging wildlife habitat. Yet FWP officials maintain that most ranchers work hard to conserve the landscape, benefiting many open-range wildlife species.

"Ranchers are one of the main reasons we still have healthy sage grouse populations in Montana," says Northrup.

Some landowners even go a step further and ensure that their land continues to benefit wildlife far into the future. Several years ago, Henry Gordon of Chinook sold FWP a 15,000-acre conservation easement containing critical wildlife habitat, including sagebrush-grasslands. Gordon comes from a line of stockgrowers stretching back to when his grandfather first filed for a homestead in 1888. Though now solely in cattle, the family also raised sheep for years.

"I can remember when I was a boy and we'd be running about ten sheep camps," says Gordon, 56. "My dad would go out and hunt large groups of sage hens for camp meat. We'd see those grouse in bunches of 100 to 150."

Such sage grouse numbers will likely never return. But Gordon, a lifelong wildlife fan, wants to make sure the prairie birds and other critters always have a home on his property. "It's my way of saying that this land will never be torn up," he says. "That's what it's all about. I like wildlife—swift fox, sage hens, and the other birds."

He also, understandably, likes cattle. "I'm a cow man," Gordon adds, "and you've got to understand that grass is our main liveli-

DOES HUNTING HURT SAGE GROUSE POPULATIONS?

Environmentalists and ranchers don't always agree on issues related to wildlife. But over the past several years, some members of both camps have suggested that if sage grouse numbers are declining, Montana should end or greatly curtail hunting harvest. In 2005, the Montana Stockgrowers Association advocated reducing the sage grouse bag limit to one bird and dramatically shortening the season.

FWP opposed the proposal. Jeff Herbert, assistant chief of the FWP Wildlife Division, notes that of more than 900 sage grouse banded during research projects by FWP and university researchers in eastern Montana over the past several years, only nine have been shot by hunters. "That tells us harvest is just a small fraction of the population, which confirms that hunting is not driving Montana's sage grouse populations," Herbert says.

However, because sage grouse live longer and breed less productively than ducks, pheasants, and many other game birds, hunting can cut into numbers when populations get too low. Canada has decided to err on the side of caution and closed sage grouse hunting seasons entirely. Likewise, the Gunnison sage grouse subspecies in Colorado is now completely protected. Montana and other states established a trigger point at which they would adjust bag limits up or down, or, in the case of extremely low counts, not open seasons until numbers rebound.

FWP now sets sage grouse seasons using an adaptive-harvest management approach similar to how it regulates mule deer and waterfowl harvest.

"If our grouse counts on some specific leks are above average during a given year, then we will support a standard four-bird daily bag limit for sage grouse," explains Rick Northrup, FWP Upland Game Bird Program coordinator. "But if they are below average, we'll recommend a restrictive two-bird limit. That way, we can adapt the harvest to match current populations."

Adds Herbert, "Whether it's grouse harvest regulations or livestock grazing, we believe that all management decisions need to be based on the best science available." ■



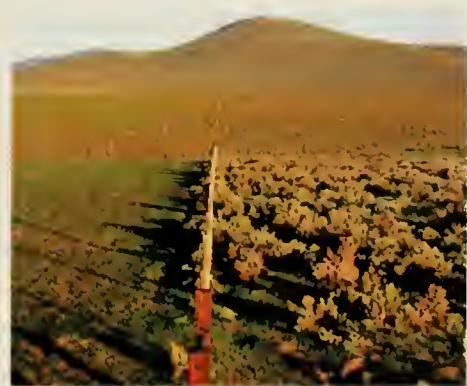
CHUCK & GALE ROBBINS

CALL IT A DAY? Some groups want FWP to reduce Montana's sage grouse bag limit to just one bird.

hood, too." When he was offered the opportunity to conserve sagebrush-grasslands that maintain healthy habitat for both wildlife and livestock, Gordon didn't think twice. "The easement is working real good for us," he says.

Hearing that from ranchers like Gordon has made Bodner, the stockgrowers association official, less critical of FWP conservation efforts. Though he and state biologists still don't see eye to eye on all aspects of sage grouse conservation, Bodner says he's pleased the department is conserving sagebrush habitat by working cooperatively with ranchers.

"I definitely think FWP is starting to take the right approach on this," he says. 🐾



CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM

MONEY TALKS The Montana Sagebrush Initiative gives ranchers a one-time payment of \$12 per acre to not spray or otherwise destroy critical sagebrush-grasslands. Above: Sagebrush removed with herbicides on one property, intact sagebrush on another.



The Underdog

The story of a fat man, a fat Lab...and love

By Gene Hill. Paintings by Nora Wildgen

They were both too fat. He had a big safety pin, the kind used for a horse blanket, holding together the front of his hunting coat, and under that an old red-and-green wool shirt that threatened to throw its buttons. His black Labrador wheezed and whistled from the effort of walking up to the line where the judges were waiting, and when he removed her collar, her neck fell to double in size. As they stood there listening to the explanation of the test, the fat black dog snuggled so close to her master's leg that she seemed to be leaning on him for support. He let his arm drop and she put her nose in his palm and closed her eyes. A minute ago I had been ready to laugh at these two, but now I had to turn for a minute and wipe away something that seemed to have gotten into my eyes.

The test wasn't easy. The first bird was a rather long blind across a weedy channel and the second mallard was a long marked single deep back among dead timber. A couple of the younger dogs had finished the series, but none without a lot of whistles and hand signals. On a rating of 1 to 10, the best score I had given was a generous 5. A lot of duck hunters would have used a boat rather than send a dog through the stumps and snags, and I wouldn't have blamed them. What we

judges had meant to be a hard marking test turned out to be one that depended a lot on pure heart; "want to" was what we ended up grading the dogs on. Most of them didn't have a lot of it.

The fat dog's name was Bingo, and somehow I got the picture of the two of them eating popcorn together and watching game shows on television. I imagined them sitting side by side at the local bar, drinking beer and watching baseball. What I couldn't imagine is one ever being more than 3 feet from the other if they could help it.

Much to my surprise and delight, Bingo did a pretty respectable job on the long blind. You could hear her for half a mile, huffing her slow way through the lotus pads and pickerel weed. At first I was worried that she'd drown or have a heart attack, but she was too fat to sink and seemed more than delighted to do something that her boss wanted done. Bingo struggled her belly over the bank, took a half dozen deep breaths, waddled over and picked up the duck, and swam back. Her master hadn't used one whistle or so much as moved a hand. It took forever, but Bingo was showing the skinny Labs a thing or two and the crowd loved every long, worried minute of it.

She finished her retrieve with a lovely little flourish, walking



around behind and sort of adjusting herself and then sitting practically on his foot and offering him the duck as if it were a crown. As one of the senior judges, I was supposed to be the very model of impartiality and decorum, but I put my notebook under my arm and joined the gallery in a spontaneous minute of applause. Then I wrote "10" next to Bingo's name on my scorecard. By now she'd recovered her breath and her handler signaled that he was ready for the next test. He had Bingo lined up perfectly and she glowed with anticipation at the shot. The bird boy threw the shackled duck and Bingo slid into the water with a very audible sigh of pleasure and began paddling toward the swamp.

You look for a lot of subtle things when you're judging a trial. You get so you can sense indecision in a dog, or reluctance. Some dogs are too bold and don't use their head, just crash on until they stumble over a bird or get handled to it. Others are too tentative, contin-

ually asking their handler, *Am I doing this right?* I don't like either type. What I like in a dog is a mixture of confidence, common sense, and obedience; about in that order. I'm big on a good dashing water entry, an aura of determination, and a feeling that a dog wants to please rather than do the job like an automaton. I like to see more of the pure dog than just the result of training.

I'd gotten away from field trials for a while because I felt that a lot of the judging was unrelated to hunting situations, and there was a laziness that ended up with the tests being too hard rather than being fair, and having a few dogs come back in recalls. I'd run a lot of dogs and had a very sensitive feeling about the work and companionship part of it, and I hated to drop a dog too quickly. I'd lost a couple of first-place ribbons because of what I felt was a lack of understanding of the dogs' problems in certain situations. I felt that a lot of judges had never really done enough running or worked enough with dogs

to be able to get a good handle on borderline judgments.

But, at the bottom, the whole thing is for the dog, not the convenience of the gallery or the handlers or the judges. You get to feeling sorry for the dogs that have handlers who are too harsh on them—and almost as often, for handlers who have dogs that are too good for them. I'd been one of the latter a couple of times and am still a little embarrassed about being obviously dumb when I should have left it all to the dog. But here I was trying to keep a good balance between my head and my heart and worrying about poor old Bingo running into an underwater log or limb and getting disoriented, or worse, hurt.

Bingo had been her perfunctory self in our other series in the morning, taking forever and looking anything but stylish or fiery, but somehow she always got the job done. Other dogs were faster, more elegant, or more exciting, but where they'd overrun a bird, then circle for a minute trying to find it, Bingo would walk up to exactly where it was, pick it up, and come back. One of the gallery remarked that watching her was "as exciting as seeing a guy lay brick." That may be, but the brick got laid, and laid right. And after all, this was just a fun interclub trial, not a big regional AKC-sanctioned affair. We were supposed to be judging hunting retrievers, not watching a track meet. And as much as I like a dog that can zip out and zip back in, I also respect the old workman who gets it done right the first time.

Bingo was not going to be placed first or second. Those places had already been established by a couple of dogs that were clearly "big trial" contenders, dogs that shouldn't have been at this trial at all. It was just that their owners were ribbon-hungry and liked to show off a bit when the chance came along. But a third here was not to be taken lightly. There were plenty of old campaigners doing their stuff, and a couple of up-and-coming dogs that had it all on any given day.

Sometimes in competitions, a great and certain knowledge spreads among the judges, the spectators, and the con-

I was somewhat in love with her by now and more than a little envious of her owner.

testants that a prize is deserved, regardless of what the rules or the scores are. And there was poor old Bingo, looking like the kid at the picnic who had unexpectedly been asked to join the games and said, "Why not?"

Well, not to prolong what you've already guessed. Bingo did it all, and we gave her the ribbon for third place with as much pleasure and sense of rightness as I can ever remember.

At the little awards ceremony, her master poured her tiny mouth-

fuls of beer from a long-necked bottle, and Bingo seemed rather self-satisfied. I was somewhat in love with her by now and more than a little envious of her owner. When it was his turn to come up and get his ribbon we all burst into a few minutes of applause and cheering that we had held, pent up, for some time. He

took the ribbon and waited until we'd quieted down, then bent over and fastened it to Bingo's collar, playing with her ear for a second, and speaking for both of them said, "Well, as they used to say, the show ain't ever over until the fat lady sings."

Then he and the fat lady went over to his truck. He lifted her into the front seat and gave her the last swallow out of the beer bottle, handed the empty to a friend who came to say good-bye, and they drove off.

I watched the truck disappear as it turned through a stand of pines, and through the rear window I could see them sitting shoulder to shoulder. For a moment I thought about love. Not the kind that they sing about or the kind that disgraces a bumper sticker, but the kind that means you'll put your arm in the fire. The kind that becomes a Navy Cross or Silver Star—or a 10-cent pink-and-silver ribbon. The kind that you don't talk about. The kind that is just there, like the Earth.

I wasn't the only one watching the truck fade away.

Half a dozen of the crowd had moved off by themselves and were watching it too. I

wondered what we all felt in common, and I think it was sorrow. Suddenly we all knew what it was we had been looking for for so long, from someone or something...and we felt that it had passed us by. 🐾



This story first appeared in the November 1984 issue of Field & Stream. Gene Hill, a columnist for 20 years, died in 1977. Used with permission. Nora Wildgen is an environmental artist in Minneapolis.



Spruce (Franklin's) Grouse

Dendragapus canadensis

By John Fraley

Recently, a male spruce grouse blocked my way on a backcountry trail. I eventually had to move the brazen bird out of the way with a stick. I can't count how many of these unwary birds I've seen just sitting along a trail or on a low branch, apparently believing they were camouflaged. No wonder they're called "fool hens." Though they seem to occasionally avoid coyotes or lynx by flying up onto tree branches, I've often wondered how these mountain grouse can possibly maintain their populations.

Spruce grouse (also known as Franklin's grouse) are a bird of the northern mountains, common in backcountry lodgepole pine and mixed conifer forests in all northern Rocky Mountain states, Alaska, and Canada. The grouse was named after the arctic explorer John Franklin, who led expeditions in the

Northwest Territories in the 1820s. Meriwether Lewis described a subspecies of the spruce grouse that he observed in 1805 in the mountains of the Columbia Drainage.

APPEARANCE Male spruce grouse are dark gray above, with a black throat and breast patch, distinct white spots on the breast and belly, and scarlet eye combs. Females are generally brown above and white with brown bars below. The tail feathers of both sexes are unbarred and tipped with white. A spruce grouse is about 16 inches long and weighs just over 1 pound. It is slightly smaller than a ruffed grouse and about half the size of a blue grouse.

REPRODUCTION Male spruce grouse defend their territory during the spring breeding season by strutting and assuming blustery poses. To court the female, the male leaps from the ground, beating his wings behind his back to make loud clapping sounds.

Females emit a long series of songlike notes during courtship. After mating, females lay 8 to 14 spotted-brown eggs in nests on the ground in heavy brush. After the eggs hatch, females keep their chicks close by, partly by communicating with clucks and coos. Despite the wary mother's presence, however, most chicks end up in the stomachs of American martens, short-tailed weasels, raptors, and other predators. After the broods break up in the fall, spruce grouse spread out and become solitary.

FOOD Spring through fall, spruce grouse eat insects, berries, the leaves of many different plants, and conifer needles. During winter, they mainly eat fir, pine, and spruce needles. The crop can store up to 10 percent of the bird's body weight in needles, which the bird digests at night. And the gizzard nearly doubles in size to hold the large volume of conifer needles needed to supply enough calories for the bird to survive frigid temperatures.

STATUS AND MANAGEMENT IN MONTANA FWP does not monitor spruce grouse populations, but reports from hunters and anecdotal observations by biologists and hikers indicate stable populations. Rick Northrup, FWP's Upland Game Bird Program coordinator, says the department hopes to someday begin monitoring spruce, ruffed, and blue grouse populations. "We need a better feel for short-term and long-term trends for all mountain grouse," he says. "The information would allow us to look at the effects of habitat changes, as well as provide basic information on bird numbers."

During the fall upland bird-hunting season, spruce grouse are included in the daily bag limit of three mountain grouse. Many bird hunters don't pursue spruce grouse because the birds can be too easy to shoot and are reputed to taste of pine (due to their winter diet). However, spruce grouse offer great hunting opportunities for first-time hunters. These birds have been among the first game animals my children have taken as they learned to hunt. As for table fare, I've found that spruce grouse are excellent when simply baked with cream of chicken soup poured on top. 🐾

John Fraley coordinates FWP's regional Information and Education Program in Kalispell.



EYES OF FIRE

A sage grouse defiantly consents to being weighed and measured by University of Montana researchers. To learn how this largest of North American grouse is faring across Montana and elsewhere in the West, see our story on page 28. Photo by Brendan Moynihan.



Ranked Number One

For the past two years, *Montana Outdoors* has won first place in the state conservation magazine competition held by the Association for Conservation Information.

Montana Outdoors

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Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



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